

Amber Crews: Wisconsin regulators tell braiders yes, no and maybe

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Some people grow up braiding hair. Children practice on each other and themselves, often receiving guidance from more experienced hands. “For so many of us, especially in the African American community, braiding hair is a technique that is passed down generation to generation,” Wisconsin state Sen. Latonya Johnson, D-Milwaukee, says.

My experience was different. I learned the skill later in life as the white mother of two biracial daughters, who are now 12 and 8. As I improved my techniques and shared photos on social media, potential clients began approaching me about freelance work.

An opportunity for a side gig and maybe a full-time career emerged. I was working as a receptionist at the time, but the ability to stay home with my young family while working as a braider appealed to me. As I explored my options, my first step was to find out if I would need an occupational license.

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I contacted the Academy of Beauty Professionals, a local beauty school in Madison, and staff members told me in 2017 that I would need a full cosmetology license before I could work as a braider in Wisconsin. That was a dealbreaker for two reasons.

First, most beauty schools do not even teach braiding. And when they do, the training is superficial and not helpful. Secondly, beauty schools are expensive and would not fit into my budget or schedule as a working mother with financial

obligations.

Rather than give up, I decided to dig deeper. So in 2018 I contacted the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services, which referred me to the state Cosmetology Examining Board. At this point I was on a scavenger hunt for a simple yes-or-no answer from the government.

Ultimately, the regulators told me the same thing as the beauty school: Braiding is included in the definition of hairstyling, which requires a license. Yet other people had different opinions. Depending on who I asked, I heard yes, no or maybe.

Even lawmakers seemed confused when I testified recently in favor of [Assembly Bill 121](#). The state legislation, which is awaiting approval in the Senate after passing the Assembly on March 17, would specify that a person does not need a barbering or cosmetology license to work as a braider in Wisconsin.

Opponents who challenged me in Madison mostly expressed concerns about public health and safety. But they had to speculate about worst-case scenarios because real-world examples of harm are almost nonexistent. An [analysis](#) from the Institute for Justice, a public interest law firm that has fought for braiders in Minnesota, Illinois, Texas and elsewhere, confirms that braiding is “overwhelmingly safe.”

More importantly, allowing braiders to work without unnecessary barriers creates jobs and increases access to local economies. The gains are significant, while the risks are small and not worth the disenfranchisement of marginalized workers who are mainly women, and specifically women of color.

Regardless of policy differences, clarity in the law is always a good thing. Ambiguity invites selective and arbitrary enforcement, forcing many service providers into the shadows to avoid potential penalties. Entrepreneurs have enough to worry about as it is. They should not have to wonder if their business is even legal—or if code enforcers will show up with their clipboards and start issuing fines.

Braiding involves complex twists, turns and weaves, but the law should be straight. Wisconsin state senators have a chance to untangle the mess with AB121, which would free me and many others to work without fear.

Amber Crews is a working mother and aspiring braider who lives in Madison.